GSU's Tentative Agreement Reflects Major Wins for Graduate Workers. We're Voting No Because We Know We Can Win Even More.

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Graduate Students United has succeeded in getting the University to bargain, and secured a tentative agreement released on March 6. The TA reflects significant improvement, and includes key concessions on issues including union security, international student rights, and protections from some forms of discrimination and abuse of authority. It shows that the University knows our strength, and is prepared to make significant concessions.

But you should vote "no" on that agreement because it does not yet deliver what graduate workers at the University of Chicago need. By holding out for a better offer, we stand to win so much more.

We formed a union because we know our employer depends on us to function. The U of C is a world-class institution with an endowment exceeding $10 billion–they can afford to pay industry-leading wages and provide great benefits to the graduate workers who perform essential teaching and research labor. **There is now a simple question before us: is this TA good enough? Does it deliver all the benefits we formed a union to secure?**

Compared to contracts won at similar wealthy, private universities, **this TA makes critical and unnecessary concessions–particularly in the key areas of wages and benefits.** The compensation levels offered by the TA would hold us behind the $50k minimum standard set by unions at peer institutions, and that standard will soon be raised even higher by our colleagues who are bargaining for more. The health, vision, and dental gains–while a good start–are inadequate to meet the real needs and costs faced by graduate workers. And the childcare benefits, which would exclude most dual income families, rank the lowest out of all peer institutions.

"No" to this TA just means "not good enough." It has not yet achieved all the benefits and protections we deserve, and we should keep bargaining for better. When we return to the bargaining table, we can use tactics we have not explored yet, like open bargaining, town halls, more focused research and political education, and closer collaboration with other unions in our sector, such as Northwestern's NUGW and our own campus's Faculty Forward, who begin bargaining their next contract this month. And–though rejecting the TA and reopening bargaining would not necessarily lead us down this road–with nearly 2,000 strike pledges, we still wield the ultimate direct threat to withhold our essential labor to win what we demand and deserve.

The stipend levels set in this TA match what NUGW settled for in their recent negotiations. However, their contract fight is not over yet: colleagues at Northwestern are talking about what it would mean to reject their TA and keep bargaining for the best possible contract. **Numerous**

"vote no" campaigns, both in higher ed and other sectors have won major gains over their initial TAs: prominent examples include Columbia grad workers in 2021, Teamsters locals in 2019 and United Auto Workers in 2015. For more information, read these notes from a recent town hall with Northwestern and Columbia organizers as well as the FAQ available on Northwestern's Best Possible Contract caucus website.

Our first contract is critical. It sets the framework for labor relations between grad workers and the university, precedents for future contract negotiations, and in this case of this TA, would dictate our compensation and benefits through 2027. **This is not a moment to settle quickly: we need to fully assess what is in this contract, what has been won elsewhere, and whether we are walking away with too little compared to our peers on other campuses.**

A "no" vote sends a message to our employer that we are serious about our demands. It will build momentum for every subsequent phase of negotiation and struggle. **With a mandate to return to the table, our bargaining committee can ask for more than we went in for at first, and then win the transformative contract we deserve**–one that not only enshrines greater protections for our union's most vulnerable members, but pushes the standards up in key areas, rather than leaving us trailing peer institutions in compensation and benefits. Over the term of the contract, we will only continue to fall farther behind.

Compensation:

Graduate workers across all divisions are undercut by our TA's stipend provisions. The proposed $45k minimum stipend and annual raises match the Northwestern TA (minus a $1k signing bonus they won but we did not). But under the TA, **our compensation would fail to compete with many of the institutions our administration considers our peers, specifically Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Brown, and MIT, where graduate stipends exceed $50k**. For workers in our bargaining unit already set to earn $45k next year, including many members in the sciences, a 2.5% annual increase will not keep up with inflation, meaning those workers' *real wages* would be stagnant or possibly even fall year-over-year throughout the life of the contract. **It is a hard sell for members to vote for a TA that leaves them as good or even worse than they stood to fare without a union contract. Luckily, they don't have to, as raises for all workers are still winnable.**

A major reason for our low stipend is pretty clear: we went in asking for too little. However, it's not too late to course correct. In fact, time is on our side. In October, GSU's bargaining committee went to the table with an opening ask of $45k for this academic year and $47.7k for next year. Though it's unusual for a party in bargaining to demand something higher than their original ask, it's neither unheard of nor illegal, as long as there is a reasonable explanation–which we have. **In December, our industry landscape shifted: Yale's Local 33 won a transformative first contract that will soon push graduate workers' pay above $53,000, Brown's graduate union ratified a contract that granted six months of backpay and put all workers on track to earn $52,198, and Harvard announced a new minimum stipend of $50,000.** Our UE siblings at Dartmouth and Johns Hopkins–currently negotiating

their first contracts–are holding out for stipend floors of $55k and $52k, respectively, as well as annual cost-of-living adjustments tied to inflation. Graduate workers at Boston University opened bargaining two months ago demanding $62,440, and they are currently escalating their campaign. Grad workers at Stanford and Cornell are also currently bargaining, and determined to win industry-leading wages. **If we stay in the fight alongside other grad unions, we are all well-positioned to win transformative, sector-wide wage increases.** We can build on the strength of workers at other institutions by rejecting this deal, returning to the bargaining table, and demanding a stipend that meets the moment. **If we settle now, we will soon find ourselves at the very bottom of compensation scales in our industry, and we'll be locked in for the three-year duration of our contract. But it's not too late to avoid that mistake.**

The low stipend certainly can't be justified by comparing our cost of living to our peer institutions' areas: data shows, for instance, that New Haven, Providence, Hanover, and Baltimore are more affordable than Chicago. Furthermore, our contract negotiations have taken place during a period of historic inflation, during which graduate workers' needs have only increased. And GSU members will surely recognize the financial burdens associated with living in what is essentially a "company town"--given that the University owns a significant portion of commercial and residential real estate in Hyde Park and the surrounding neighborhoods, our employer profits off of our inflated cost of living, which we can expect to increase dramatically year-over-year. Don't buy it if anyone tells you it's okay to settle for less.

Just consider how **our wages have been suppressed over the last several years, despite record high inflation.** For graduate workers who matriculated in 2020 with a stipend of $31k, for example, the stipend increase to $37k this year and $45k next fall might feel like a significant improvement. However, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics Inflation Calculator, $31k in 2020 amounts to $37k in purchasing power today: we have received no real wage increase over 4 years of work. Think about your own stipend changes over time and look at the proposed increases over the life of the TA before asking: **Would this contract deliver the wages I require, and that my work deserves? Why is my labor worth less at UChicago than it would be at one of our peer institutions?**

Our employer has conditioned us to be grateful for our stagnant and artificially suppressed wages, and to be thrilled by the 'generous' offer in this TA. But we know it is possible to win so much more. To be clear: there is no chance they would come back with anything worse than the current offer. After all, their success depends on their ability to recruit the best and brightest, who will now have more reason to choose schools paying more than $50k. **We are poised to win fair, industry-benchmarked wages when we return to the bargaining table.**

Health, Dental, and Vision:

In the area of graduate worker health coverage, getting the university to acknowledge dental and vision as part of our benefits needs at all represents a modicum of progress. But **this TA does not begin to materially advance the real healthcare needs of graduate workers, as it**

preserves the status quo with respect to health insurance and only offers modest coverage of dental and vision needs.

In terms of healthcare, the TA codifies what we already have: 100% coverage of USHIP premiums. **For the many graduate workers in our bargaining unit who have struggled to have their needs met under USHIP coverage, this outcome is unacceptable.** Many other graduate unions, including Brown, Harvard, and Columbia, have won substantial allowances for out-of-pocket healthcare costs. This is an industry-standard benefit we can demand by reopening bargaining.

The cash payments of $300 and $100 in the TA, respectively touted as dental and vision allowances, will not cover our actual costs. Based on figures from the 2023-24 academic year, $300 would cover the current premium for DeltaCare HMO, UChicago's cheapest optional dental insurance ($206.64), which is only valid for use in Illinois within a very limited network of providers and carries no out of network coverage. The more traditional MetLife plans, recommended by UChicago as better options, cost $408 and $560, respectively. Clearly, the $300 allowance would leave single members with significant out-of-pocket costs for routine care, and would not begin to cover the dental costs of a family with dependents.

Similarly, the MetLife Vision policy, which costs $69.84 for one adult enrollee, covers annual exams with a $10 copay, but does not come close to covering the full cost of essential vision care. The $100 allowance fails to scratch the surface of the true cost of vision care for graduate workers needing glasses or contacts, which can cost upwards of $1,000 per year.

Finally, due to the TA's cash payment model (as opposed to our employer paying premiums directly), **these allowances will be counted as additional taxable income for workers, so the full benefit value will be unrealized.** When we return to bargaining, we can demand the full, direct coverage for dental and vision insurance that our peers have won in their contracts.

Dependent Healthcare Coverage:

The TA secures 25% coverage for USHIP premiums of spouses and child dependents. This reflects an improvement over the previous level of coverage ($0), but **if the TA is adopted, our dependent healthcare coverage would stand out as the lowest among peer institutions that offer this benefit.** Two striking outliers that provide no coverage for dependents are NUGW's TA and MIT's contract, the only two other graduate unions at private universities who have negotiated their contracts with UE. This signals a concerning, union-wide lack of industry research and political will regarding this issue, which is winnable and important.

Our colleagues at Yale, Brown, Columbia, the University of Michigan, and other campuses have won 100% coverage for the health insurance premiums of child dependents. Most graduate union contracts at peer institutions include generous coverage for spouses as well. Harvard's graduate union secured an annual fund of $475k–increasing to $500k this year–to subsidize the

cost of child and spouse healthcare, with an average annual reimbursement amount of $3,750 per family. Columbia won full health and dental coverage for dependents as well as a $225k fund to cover additional dependent medical costs.

Childcare Stipend:

The childcare benefits offered in the TA are the worst among peer institutions, far below the established industry standard and woefully insufficient compared to the true cost of childcare. According to fee schedules from Bright Horizons and Little Inspirations, the leading university-recommended daycares in Hyde Park, full-time care for children under 3 years old costs over $28,000 a year.

Currently, the university offers a childcare stipend of $2,000 per year to graduate student parents–an insultingly low amount. The TA raises this stipend at $4,000 for one child and $5,500 for two or more. While a 50% increase might seem like a "win" on first appearance, the TA is an industry-wide outlier. **The stipend amount is the lowest among our peers, and the TA codifies that this meager benefit will only be guaranteed to families earning less than $100,000 combined income per year—a policy which will exclude most working families.**

Should the TA be ratified, UChicago's child care subsidy will rank dead last when compared to peers at MIT, University of Michigan, Harvard, Yale, Brown, Columbia, and Princeton–by no small margin. Publicly available data from contracts at the aforementioned institutions points to an average guaranteed (not means tested!) child care stipend of $6,550 for one child. Workers at these schools also receive substantial additional funding for multiple children, access to back-up childcare, and additional need-based funds. Though also below the industry standard, NUGW's TA also outpaces GSU's on this issue.

The TA's family income threshold establishes a concerning and unprecedented pattern of "means testing" contractual benefits at the exclusion of most graduate workers with employed partners. A graduate worker couple earning $50k each would be denied childcare support under the current proposal. As would a family with one graduate worker earning $45k and a partner in the private sector earning $55k or more—a standard early-career salary in the education or nonprofit sectors, for example. Using the cost of childcare and the means testing formula from the TA, a family earning $100k would be expected to pay $28,000+ per year—over a quarter of gross household income—for daycare alone, and be denied the childcare stipend. **The childcare benefits proposed by the TA are unacceptable, and reflect how working parents and those considering children are structurally disincentivized from undertaking doctoral education at the University of Chicago.** We should demand better for student parents by rejecting a tentative agreement that excludes graduate workers and their families from critical benefits they need to survive, and which have been won by our peer institutions.

This issue is critical, not only for student parents, but for all workers in our bargaining unit: our contract reflects our vision for who deserves a chance to make it in our industry. Even if you are not a parent now, think about what it means to adopt a contract

that concedes that you should have no choice except to put starting a family on hold, unless you are willing to impoverish yourself or have pre-existing wealth or a high-earning partner to cover the financial burdens of childcare.

Moving Forward: Union Democracy and Our Path to Victory

GSU affiliated with the United Electrical Workers in large part because of UE's long history of practicing "them and us" unionism. At the time we affiliated, an informational FAQ noted that UE "is highly regarded for its internal democracy and willingness to fight as hard as necessary to improve conditions for workers." The motion to affiliate, passed at the General Membership Meeting on August 25, 2022, specifically highlighted UE's "principles of militant struggle, rank-and-file democracy, and building worker power."

Now is the time for us to demonstrate just what those principles mean in practice. **Debate and struggle are how we engage and unify membership, and voting no and returning to the bargaining table will produce a more transformative and powerful contract that the largest number of members are excited to ratify.** Voting no on this initial TA signals to the administration that they are not just bargaining at the table with a few representatives, but with *all* of our members—that we are all watching and ready to mobilize if we believe a contract is insufficient.

In a new round of bargaining after a "no" vote, we would be more formidable, and could deploy new tactics. We would strongly encourage, for instance, that any future bargaining sessions be open to general membership attendance–a common tactic that the union has not yet deployed and which would allow us to exert significant additional pressure on the administration. This is a tried and true bargaining strategy, one that is not only more transparent and democratic but also effective: UChicago's SEIU Faculty Forward chapter utilized open bargaining in negotiations for their first contract, something they credit with allowing them to win significant wage increases. This is to say nothing of our ultimate weapon against the administration: the threat of a strike, which nearly 2,000 of our coworkers have pledged to participate in. We stand to gain much more from this threat not by settling early, but by leaning more on the fact that a majority of our bargaining unit is willing to withhold their labor in order to secure a stronger tentative agreement. In other words, **for a variety of reasons, voting no on this tentative agreement can actually empower our union to win a better contract.**

In almost every area, the current TA places our compensation and benefits near the bottom of the scale set by peer institutions. Across the board, there is more to win on the bread-and-butter issues impacting grad workers: fair wages, comprehensive healthcare, dental, and vision coverage, and support for childcare and dependents. **It is important for us to win the most ambitious contract possible *now*—not "next time," three years down the line. We must set the bar as high as possible for future contracts,** for the sake of our current and future membership and for graduate workers around the country. If we all fight together, we can win so much more across our workplace. We hope you will join us.

Signed,

Kit Ginzky
Esther Isaac
Lex Ladge
Hannah Ozmun
David Černý
Daniel Fernandez

Other Concerns:

Teaching: For workers in the humanities and social sciences, TA touts a major rollback of the university's "Mentored Teaching Experience" model, which was introduced as a union-avoidance strategy in 2019. It's positive that the TA would allow additional payment for additional work. However, this win is inevitable: the university manufactured a major crisis of supply-and-demand and has been left with insufficient numbers of graduate workers to sustain the teaching load. It is important to remember that as the MTE system was introduced, so was a model in which stipends are guaranteed for the duration of graduate workers' degree programs, rather than a set number of years, after which time workers would be left scrambling for other sources of funding. In light of this, we should be very wary about agreeing to a contract that eliminates the MTE system without first codifying the existing policy of funding for graduate workers throughout their entire time-to-degree. To accept anything less is a dangerous bargain–it's easy to imagine how the university could exploit it to roll back graduate student funding to the pre-2019. The MTE system was also linked to caps on cohort sizes. Could a revised and improved TA secure guarantees from the University that it will not unilaterally shrink incoming cohort sizes as a result of increased stipends and other financial benefits?

Title IX Carved-Out of Grievance Procedure: Sexual assault and harassment cases are currently not covered under our grievance procedure, and must be instead adjudicated under Title IX. In the current TA, GSU conceded this issue, as did NUGW, even though it has already been won in tentative agreements by our UE siblings at Dartmouth and Johns Hopkins, among other grad unions. This is particularly important given how Title IX's protections are vulnerable to swings in partisan politics. See this example of how a Title IX complaint at the University of Chicago, filed during the Obama administration, languished for 5 years before it was dismissed under Betsey DeVos. Also, this op-ed from a NUGW rank-and-file organizer lays out the stakes of accepting a contract that denies us this essential workplace protection.

Stipend Data:

–GSU opening proposal on 10/17/23 called for $45k in 2023-24, $47,700k in 2024-25, and $50,562 in 2025-26
–TA: $45,000 in 2024-25, $46,350 in 2025-26, and $47,741 in 2026-27

-Northwestern TA: $41k on 6/1/24; $45k on 9/1/24; $46,350 on 9/1/25; $47,741 on 9/1/26

-MIT: $45,480-$52,302 with 5.5% raise

-Harvard: $50k minimum in 2023-24

-Yale: $48,330k minimum in 2023-24; $49,538k in 2024-25; $50,777k in 2025-26; $52,046k in 2026-27

-Columbia: $40,324 floor (base pay + summer stipend) in 2023-24; subsidized housing provided for 5 years

-Brown: $49,012 base stipend 2024-25

-Princeton: $40,000 base in 2022-23 (pre-union contract); anti-union bump raised to $50k

Childcare Data:

–GSU opening proposal on 10/17/23 called for $5,500 for one dependent, $7,500 for two, $9,500 for three or more. Also called for need-based supplemental aid on application basis, back-up childcare paid for by university, and $5,000 for new child (birth or adoption)
–GSU introduced means testing for families earning $120k+ in their proposal at 11:20am on 2/22. Union dropped their proposal for new parent assistance in same draft. University responded with means testing for families earning $100k+
–TA: $4k for one child; $5,500 for two or more; means tested for families earning $100k+. No supplemental funding, back-up childcare, or new parent funds (in cases other than adoption)

-Northwestern TA: $5k for one child; $8k for two children; $12k for three+ children

-MIT: need-blind grant of $6,500 for one; $7,500 for two; $8,500 for three+ children. Also supplemental need-based grant of up to $10k per family. Subsidized back-up childcare available.

-University of Michigan: need-based awards with annual maximum of $6,860 for one; $10,058 for two; $13,262 for three+ children

-Harvard: $830,000 annual fund to cover childcare expenses. Automatic award of $7k/year for all applicants. Reimbursement of up to $7,500 per child *each semester* based on actual cost of childcare.

-Yale: need-blind $7,500 grant for anyone with a child under 18; increases by $2,500/year for any additional children under age 6. Will increase according to annual COL adjustment.

-Brown: $6k per child, up to 3 children

-Columbia: $5k for each child under age 6, increasing to $5.5k on 8/1/24

-Princeton: $6,500 per child, per year (maximum of $19,500)

Dependent Healthcare Coverage:

–Harvard: Annual fund of $475k (increasing to $500k this year) to subsidize cost of child + spouse healthcare. Average reimbursement amount: 3,750

–Yale: 100% medical insurance coverage for spouse and children. 40% coverage for dental.
–Brown: 100% medical coverage for dependents
–University of Michigan: 100% coverage for child dependents
–Columbia: 100% medical and dental coverage for spouses and children + $225k fund to cover additional dependent medical costs